Building a Community Bus: Guide to Coordinating Pupil and Public Transportation

October 2004
Draft

Washington State Department of Transportation

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COUNCIL ON
COORDINATED TRANSPORTATION

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Chapter 1   What is the Purpose of this Document?

Transportation is fundamental to quality of life, economic vitality, and a vibrant community. In recognition of this, the public makes a considerable investment in public transportation to ensure access to education, training, jobs, child care, goods and services, medical care, social and recreational activities, and other necessary life purposes.

Because of this public investment, it is incumbent upon us to use the public dollar to the best advantage when operating our public programs, particularly in times when budget constraints can result in service reductions.

Coordination is one tool in our toolbox to help us manage our resources better. Through coordination, we can:

- Offer more rides to more people, serving a greater number of people within current resources.

- Maximize the use of the public dollar by eliminating duplication and inefficiency.

- Avoid or reduce the amount of service cutbacks that might otherwise be necessary.

- Attract new money by demonstrating wise use of scarce resources and responsiveness to community need.

Though coordination makes sense intuitively, it is difficult to achieve across the different public programs with their different missions, funding mandates, rules and regulations, administrative structures, and cultural outlooks.

The purpose of this document is to provide information and tools to facilitate coordination between schools and other community transportation providers. The document will:

- Describe the benefits that school districts and communities can enjoy when they coordinate their transportation resources.

- Identify attitudinal, perceptual, and regulatory barriers specific to the coordination of school transportation.

- Suggest possibilities for coordination that preserve our cultural values to protect children. These values are reflected in terms of vehicle standards, operation characteristics, and driver screening and training for the transportation of school children.

To do this, the document will:

Describe the Environment in Washington State for Coordinating Community Transportation With Pupil Transportation

School buses are everywhere

School buses are the most numerous vehicles for providing public transportation in the state of Washington. In every part of the state, school districts either own and operate buses, or contract for school bus services. While school transportation is certainly more complex than it was 25 years ago, in virtually every place many school buses only transport school children in traditional fashion, home-to-school, school-to-home, a few hours morning and afternoon, 180 days a year.

Resources are limited

In many rural areas, school buses are the only buses and transportation through community-based organizations may be very limited. However, the state's pupil transportation funding formula does not fully cover the costs of providing pupil transportation as operated by most districts. Many school districts must supplement with locally generated funds, funds taken from basic education, or must limit transportation services to the basic regulatory requirements.

At the same time, communities are struggling to find mobility options for elderly, disabled, and low-income people who have no means to transport themselves.

Opportunities to stretch existing resources can be found

There are examples of coordination between school districts and other transportation providers that have resulted in benefits to the school district, the other organizations, and to the community. However, the unique mission for school bus transportation has made it awkward to integrate into local coordination planning. Transportation is not, per se, the mission of a school district; it is a means to their mission. To become involved in coordinated transportation, the school board necessarily needs to make a decision to participate in a larger community service mission, in order to obtain benefits for the district.

On the other hand, community transportation is the key mission of transit systems and many community transportation providers. This document will help communities identify opportunities and find ways to take advantage of the opportunities that exist.

Identify Regulatory and Other Barriers to Coordination

There are common barriers that schools and other transportation programs face as they plan to coordinate services

Barriers to coordinating transportation resources to meet community needs fall into these general categories:

- Governance
- Regulations
- Funding
- Operations
- Information and Data
- Accountability

How do different agencies with different funding schemes manage to appropriately distribute costs when carrying passengers together on a single vehicle in a way that meets the funding guidelines of each agency and assures that each agency carries its own weight? How do you develop the trust for different agencies to work together on allocating costs? What are the regulations on vehicle standards, driver certification, and driver training? What are the policies on trip purposes and passenger eligibility?

There are unique issues that communities must address to achieve coordination of pupil and community transportation

With school buses, the larger question is the vulnerability of the passengers and society's uniquely prescribed governance over the provision of public education in general, and school bus transportation in particular. Experience shows that there are no "safe places"; so relative safety must be evaluated based on community norms and expectations. If the core values that have led to the establishment of special protection of school children are not understood, acknowledged and addressed, coordination of school transportation will not be successful.

Within school transportation, calls for increasing standards in areas of driver and attendant screening and training, preparation for terrorist attacks, protecting against abductions and kidnappings, three-point lap-shoulder belts, and requirements for attendants on every bus are increasing the service gap between school transportation and transit as they are currently configured.

Offer Strategies and Techniques to Overcome Barriers and Implement Coordination Projects

Coordination is not easy. There are barriers, both real and perceived. Yet for every barrier, there is a strategy for working within or around it. Creative people find ways to meet challenges and overcome barriers. This report will draw upon the experience of successful people as they found ways to make good things happen in their communities.

The Silo Effect

We are all in boxes

Agencies and programs within agencies are structured like silos. That is, they are organized to deliver a specific service, for a specific purpose, to a specific client group, according to a specific set of rules and regulations, within a specific geographical area, and around a specific funding source. Accountability is within the silo. Performance is evaluated within the silo. There is no incentive to step out of the silo to see if services can be improved by doing business in a different way. The current system has no rewards for that.

Riders who fit within a silo can get excellent service to the extent that funding allows. But what about those who don't fit within a box: a school child wanting to participate in after school activities; a senior wanting to go to a movie; a Medicaid client wanting to go grocery shopping. Not only are we unable to meet the all the needs of our own client groups, we can't begin to address overall community needs.

The Problem...

TRANSIT   DSHS   SCHOOLS   PRIVATE   OTHERS

TRIPS   GAPS   TRIPS   GAPS   TRIPS   GAPS   TRIPS   GAPS   TRIPS

DUPLICATON
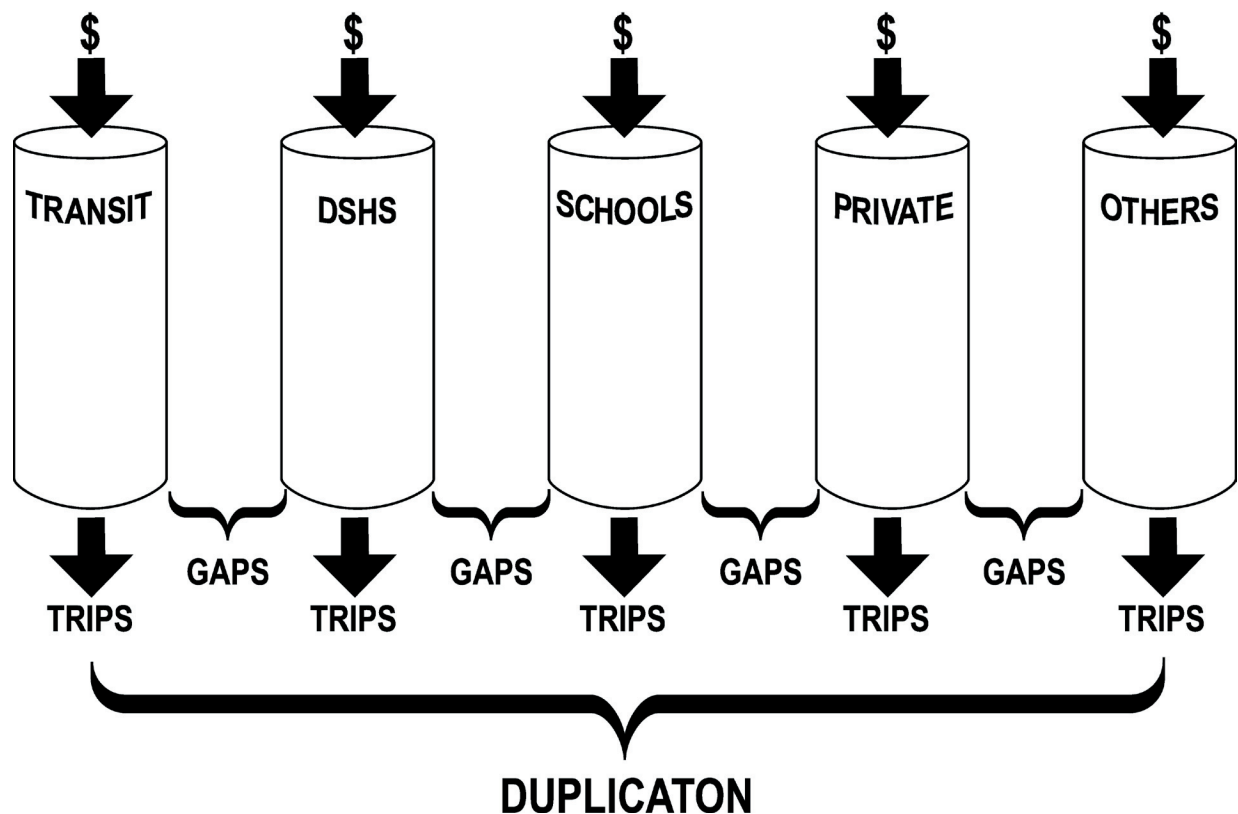
Stepping out of the box

Coordination requires stepping out of your silo and exploring different ways of doing things. We can spend our careers doing an excellent job within our silo, with no pressures to do otherwise. When times are lean, we cut back services and watch our wallets. When times are good, we add services and address more needs. As long as we operate within budget, follow the rules, deliver the service, and attend to quality, we are perceived as doing a good job.

However, we can look at things differently; and in doing so, we might be able to provide more and better services to our clients, and as a bonus, serve a greater community need. If we provide more services for each public dollar (from every source) through the establishment of coordination, legislators may well be more open to providing additional funding based on our good stewardship.

Eliminating silos is not realistic, since programs need structure for administrative purposes, but through partnerships, technology, leadership, and innovation, we can create crosswalks or permeable walls between silos. What if we weren't stuck in our silos, but could venture out to be partners in a community transportation plan? We could work together to address the transportation needs of our own customers and our community, each of us doing our part; sharing, coordinating, integrating, or consolidating resources to fit each transportation situation.

Careful planning can allow a community system to honor the regulatory, budgetary, and service needs of each participating organization, while providing options for delivering service that better meets client and community needs.

Have a vision

If we can envision a coordinated community transportation system, we can get there. It may happen slowly. It may happen in increments. But as each agency becomes more comfortable and more willing to step out of the silo, the vision will be realized. The smallest steps we take move us closer to the vision. Coordination is a good idea whose time has come. Successful coordination generally begins with baby steps.

A simple children's card game is played by laying a deck of cards face down on the table. There are two of each card. When a player turns over two matching cards, he gets to keep the cards and take another turn. The secret is remembering the cards that have been turned over before so that when a card is turned over you know where its match is located.

Similarly in transportation, a specific rider need is matched to existing unfilled capacity and a light bulb goes off that provides an "aha" moment. The match of capacity and ridership, or the sharing of a non-passenger function such as maintenance, dispatching, or fueling makes such intuitive sense that coordination spontaneously ignites. Successful coordination begets more coordination.

The Solution...

More Mobility
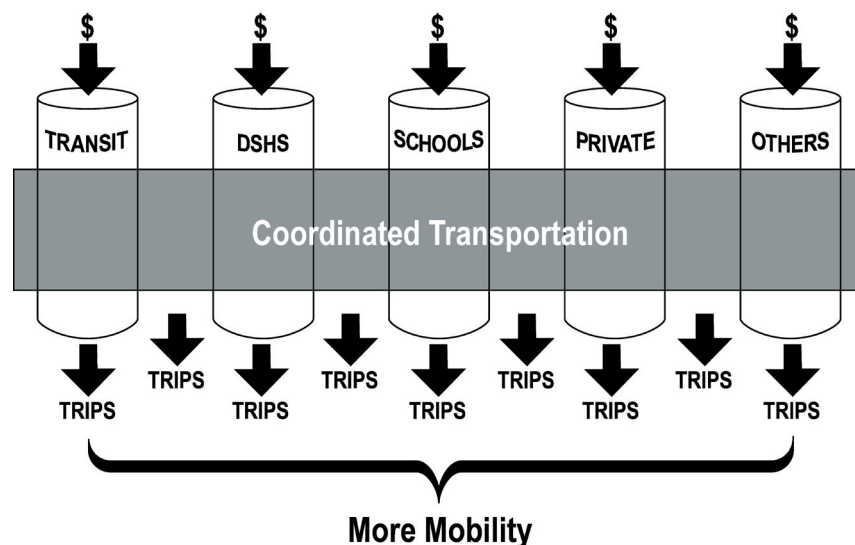
Why Coordinate? What's In It for Us?

The answer to the question about coordination, "What's in it for us?" is harder for school transportation providers to answer than it is for those who understand the unmet public transportation needs of the broader community. School boards need a good reason to get involved in community coordination initiatives, since the benefits may not be immediately obvious to them. Reasons not to coordinate may be the first reaction to a suggested partnership:

We're doing a great job now, why should we change?

Pupil transportation is very prescribed. Districts follow an established way of doing business and are rewarded with positive performance measures. Students are transported safely. Students get to school and home on time. Buses get the maximum life span. The service operates within budget. Parents and the school board are satisfied. With constant affirmation that the current system is a good one, school transportation providers don't feel a need to look at options for doing things differently.

When money is tight, we just tighten our belts

School boards and school bus systems feel the pressure of tighter public dollars today, especially when these dollars must come from local levies to allow districts to spend above the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) allocation. Their response is usually to achieve minor cost savings by tweaking the system, such as reduction of employee benefits, pushing the vehicle life cycle, reductions in safety and training, multi-tripping, more students on buses producing longer ride times, or changing from home to group stops. When these strategies have been maximized, student eligibility is reduced, meaning fewer students have access to a school bus ride. Schools don't automatically look at partnering with other organizations as a means to stretch their resources or address needs that the districts can't meet.

We know our customer and our business

One reason school transportation often cannot see the possibilities for coordination is that school transportation is so closely defined and the task appears to be the same year after year. Specific children need to be delivered or picked up from specific schools at a specific time of day. The community to be served is the school district; more specifically, the individual schools within the school district and the students who are within those attendance boundaries. Safety is the card that trumps all others. Increasing ridership through customer service or coordination is a foreign concept. Education, not transportation, is the primary mission of the schools.

Public transit systems, on the other hand, though they face budget constraints as well, wish to increase ridership, either on existing routes or through grant opportunities that allow them to target new user groups, open new service routes, or operate in additional hours of the day. The community to be served is a specified geographical area, usually a county, and all the residents of that geographical area. Customer service and satisfaction are the greatest concern because those issues drive ridership.

Other community transportation providers, even if serving specific client populations through contracts with public agencies or through grant funding, are generally seeking ways to expand their funding base and serve a broader community need.

School transportation has not seen itself as part of the mix of community resources and community need, but rather sees itself as a distinct and separate function. While student transportation is indeed "publicly funded transportation," it has never perceived itself as "public transportation." Thus, the idea of creating community partnerships to increase the community's capacity to provide transportation is a foreign one.

We must manage our risk

Making decisions about transportation modes must be done with an awareness of the relative safety of each mode. A recent Transportation Research Board report, "The Relative Risks of School Travel: A National Perspective and Guidance for Local Community Risk Assessment," identifies exactly "What's in it for us?" at the most basic level of safety. Safety of school buses and "other buses" as currently used was compared. Little difference in risk could be identified. The caveat of "as currently used" is important because these are the circumstances under which the current safety record has been established.

Some school districts make use of transit systems for transporting children to school and back. Some of these transport children of all ages on transit buses, but in most cases, transit bus student riders are older students. The school district will serve the younger students, while putting middle and high school students on transit. When safety records are compared, we need to take this into consideration. The extra protection of school bus regulations may be an important component in the safe transportation of younger children. Older students currently riding transit appear to be capable of riding transit buses with unknown adults. While school districts appear comfortable with putting their children on transit buses, the issue of putting non-students on school buses must be evaluated for risk to students and exposure to liability for the district.

While the safety study did not find significant differences between bus modes, transportation in personal vehicles—especially when cars are driven by teens, walking, and biking, were significantly more dangerous. Teen drivers and their passengers accounted for over 2/3 of all children killed during school travel hours, despite representing only 15 percent of student travel trips.

Moving children from bus transportation to other vehicles can result in measurable increases in risk. If a school district changes its transportation eligibility from .5 miles to 2 miles, the change can be objectively expressed as an increase in risk that can be measured as a decrease in years between school travel fatalities for that school. Similarly, if a school district expands bus service through a coordination effort such as that in Mason County where late bus service is provided on school buses under the authority of Mason County Transit, an improvement in risk can be measured.

Because coordination raises fears of increasing risks to schoolchildren, comparison of risks must be done objectively. Until time passes, it isn't known if an actual change will be positive or negative, but national risk estimates allow informed decisions to be made. Nevertheless, the fear of an increase in risk creates a reluctance to try a new approach.

There aren't enough hours in the day

People feel pressed to just meet the daily requirements of the job. They have trouble finding time to reach out and partner with others, to attend another meeting, to plan and implement a new service delivery model. They need evidence that an investment of time and energy at the front end could mean reduced demands on time and energy in the long run. Lack of time is a universal problem. People must allow for the possibility that an up front investment of effort can create future benefits.

Who do we mean by "us"?

Finally, the answer to the question, "What's in it for us?" must be framed in another question, "Who is 'us'?" Does a school board, or a Medicaid transporter, or a not-for-profit agency exist in a vacuum to serve its clientele without regard for the broader community? What does it mean to be a good neighbor? What does an improvement in the quality of life through access to employment, medical care, or social interaction for a few citizens mean for the quality of life for all citizens? The sense of connection that these questions foster must underlie successful coordination projects. Without that joint commitment to the community, coordination efforts can fall prey to unproductive turf battles. Yet, at the same time, each partner must benefit from the work of coordination to justify participation.

So What ARE the Benefits of Coordination to a School District?

Communities that have been successful in coordinating school and community transportation report significant benefits, such as:

- More work for drivers,
- Cost savings,
- More services, and
- Political support.

More work for drivers may not immediately seem to generate cost savings. Coordination's goal is to use vehicles more effectively to serve more programs, each of which have revenue streams. This means serving more people with the same vehicles using all available revenue streams and providing a better quality job for the transportation employee.

Drivers get more work hours and retention problems diminish

Some school bus drivers are drawn to the job because they want part-time work, but many wish to increase their work hours and, therefore, their income. This is of particular concern in the summer and during school vacations, when school buses are traditionally not operating.

Coordination creates opportunities for increases in both productivity and work hours for drivers, but new work patterns must be the subject of negotiations with employees. Some contracts guarantee drivers a minimum number of hours, and as a result, drivers get paid for hours when they are not working because there is not enough work to fill those hours. Drivers who are used to getting paid for four hours to do three hours of work will not be eager to work four hours for four hours of pay. Potentially, more work could mean higher hourly costs for the employer if employees previously not qualifying for benefits now qualify, or if employees end up receiving overtime pay. Decisions must be made with a clear understanding of the balance between keeping good employees, even potentially at a higher per hour cost, and dealing with a revolving door workforce where all the organizational energy is spent on recruiting and training for undesirable jobs.

Cost savings occur

Coordination of administrative functions can result in cost savings. Potential areas of administrative coordination with other agencies include:

- Driver background checks
- Drug screening
- Driver training
- Vehicle maintenance
- Vehicle parking
- Vehicle fueling
- Software purchases
- Dispatching equipment
- Customer interaction
- Community outreach and education

Coordination of service delivery also can mean cost savings.

- Reduced number of vehicles on the road or reduced vehicle miles.

- Grouped rides means shared costs.

- Better retention of drivers leads to less money spent on advertising for new drivers, conducting background checks, interviewing and selecting staff, and training new drivers.

More individual needs can be met

In school districts, everyone wants the vehicles at the same time, so some services are impossible to provide. There are many unique programs and individual trips. Transportation sufficient to meet demand for after school activities is not possible in many districts. The OSPI funding formula does take into account activity trips, so these important components of the educational program are funded entirely by local funds or by taking money from the basic education distribution. If parents cannot help with these additional needs, students may not be able to participate. Coordination with other community providers could make these services possible.

Expensive and difficult trips can be provided

Trips with unusual circumstances can place a disproportionate strain on the budgets of both school districts and rural demand response systems. Whenever a bus is dedicated to a single trip for one, or even as much as three or four hours, the system resources are not being used productively. Such a circumstance could be the result of an extremely remote passenger location; special transportation needs requiring additional equipment on the bus; or transportation to a distant out-of-district school. While the bounds of transit entities' service is limited by their service areas, school districts can be required through IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) to provide transportation to any school identified in an Individual Education Plan (IEP). This cannot only be out of district; it can be out of state and even require air transportation. In these circumstances, coordination with other providers to reach a remote location may be a more practical and less expensive option.

School districts are now dealing with the challenges of transporting foster children and homeless children who are not physically within the boundaries of the school they attend. Policy makers have made a decision that children are best served by remaining in the same school, when placement in foster care or homelessness disrupts their living situation. This places an enormous burden on school transportation. Many schools are using high cost modes to meet obligations to these students. Through coordination with community providers, schools can find better transportation options than school buses and taxicabs.

Community relationships can be improved

To pass a school levy, school districts increasingly rely on the votes of district parents as well as people with no children in the school system. While educational quality is a favorite buzzword, the only parts of the education system that voters regularly see are school buses and the school grounds as they drive past. When people perceive school buses to be a community resource, they may be more likely to support schools.

What is Effective Coordination?

Certain attitudes and actions lead to effective coordination.

Strong partnerships

Agencies and school districts realize that in partnership they can achieve more than if they continue to operate independently. They develop and maintain partnerships based on common interests and common needs. There is ongoing communication, sharing, and exploration of ways to improve services through collaboration.

A systems approach

Agencies and school districts must learn to think of transportation within the community as an inter-related, interdependent system of facilities, vehicles, drivers, and riders. Actions and changes in one part of the system have an impact on other parts of the system. When the pieces work together as a system, transportation needs of each agency are more completely addressed than if each agency operates as an independent entity.

A community approach

Agencies and school districts realize that they are part of a common community. The community has transportation needs and each agency has a role in meeting community needs. The student who rides the school bus during the day, rides the transit bus on the weekend. The people who use publicly funded transportation do not place themselves in silos. They are residents of the community who make use of the resources their community has to offer. They care less about who runs the vehicle and what color the bus is, and more about whether or not they can get places safely, comfortably, conveniently, and on time. Thinking in terms of addressing community needs leads to innovative partnerships and solutions.

Everyone is a winner

The ultimate goal of coordination is to make the best use of community resources so that more rides can be provided to more people. The organizations involved benefit from an increase in services, a decrease in cost, or both. Some may benefit more than others. Some may give more in one area of coordination, and gain more in another. Some will experience short-term gains, while others will experience the benefits over the long run. There are trade-offs to be made. Coordination is effective when all of the partners in a coordination project are winners. Everyone needs to benefit in the long run or they will be reluctant to join in a coordination effort.

Everyone has a role

Within a community, each organization has a role in meeting the transportation needs of a specific sector of the community. Each organization will participate at different levels and in different ways, as able.

Generally an organization focuses on transportation for a specific client group, for a specific purpose. Some organizations have a broader transportation role within a community. Even when involved in a coordination partnership, each organization's primary responsibility is to fulfill the mission for which it was established and funded. This does not mean that these organizations cannot work together for the community good. It means that each will play a different role and cannot be expected to shortchange their primary mission for the greater good of the community, however altruistic we'd like to be. Coordination is effective when agencies respect each other and help each other achieve agency-specific goals while promoting the community good.

Plan for change but embrace the serendipity

An environment conducive to coordination is created when the partners create a vision for the community and a plan for getting there. Many of Washington's 39 counties are engaged in community coalitions to:

- Inventory community transportation resources and infrastructure.

- Identify community transportation needs.

- Identify gaps in services.

- Develop a model for coordinating transportation to meet community needs.

- Prepare an implementation and evaluation plan.

- Implement a coordinated community transportation system.

As communities engage in this analysis and planning, they are moving toward a larger vision, which may take years to reach. So as they do this, it is at the same time important for them to be open to the serendipitous moment. Small steps and successes on the journey toward the larger vision can result in a giant leap forward and can inspire greater efforts on the part of coalition members.

When excess capacity is matched to unmet need in a setting in which regulations or tradition do not overwhelm the possibilities for success, good things can happen. Coordination can result from the serendipitous awareness of this possibility of matching need and capacity. When people conclude, "it just makes sense," attitudinal barriers will be much easier to overcome. The sharing of vehicles and commingling of passengers has very high visibility and it raises concerns that must be addressed. Coordination that is invisible, for instance shared maintenance services, does not even make it onto the horizon of public perception, but can help build trust between the partners.

Are There Successful School/Community Coordination Models?

Coordination is old hat—within modes. School districts, transit agencies, and community transporters have been coordinating within modes for decades. Whether it is sharing vehicles, substitute drivers, or a trip to a remote destination, neighbors have always called each other up to find out "if you have a bus going to wherever." The difference in the coordination suggested through this document is that this coordination is often between modes. This difference requires careful planning because of differences in vehicles, drivers, and operating environment.

The Transportation Cooperative Research Program did an in-depth study of 13 successful coordinated transportation systems across the country that included student transportation. Three basic shared transportation models were identified, and a fourth model is the sharing of other basic functions of a transportation system. The three models for coordinating passenger transportation are:

- Co-mingling of passengers,

- Off-hours use of school buses, and

- Student use of non-school transportation resources.

Each of these models has further variations within the basic model.

Co-mingle passengers

Co-mingling on a school bus is the mixing of school students with other non-school student passengers. Co-mingled populations can include preschool children such as those attending Head Start programs, adult riders who may be screened to ride the bus on a daily basis, and finally, the general population. Each category of rider presents different challenges.

Preschool children would presumably present little danger to school age children, but the parents or agency responsible for the infants and toddlers may be concerned about the behavior of older school children. For reasons such as those expressed in "stranger danger" programs, parents express concern about any adults on the bus with their children. At least two states have provisions for adults to be screened to ride the school bus with school children. This screening process limits the availability of transportation on school buses to the general public, but does make the resource of school bus transportation available for those who can use it for daily transportation to work or other purposes.

In one coordinated model reviewed, the school buses were modified to make non-student use of buses more comfortable and accommodating, but these changes must be reviewed to determine if they would meet Washington school bus specifications. This was accomplished by careful choice of specifications while still remaining within the requirements of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) for school buses.

Interestingly, the discomfort with co-mingling is not simply a concern for parents wanting to protect their children. Adults often find traveling with school children, especially teenagers to be a stressful experience. Any plan for co-mingling of students with other passengers must be carefully planned to assure success. The Mason County Transit cooperative transportation project, which has accomplished co-mingling of student and adult passengers, benefits from small town values, low energy time of day, and buses that are not packed with teens.

Use school buses for other purposes in the off-hours

Using school buses for other types of passenger transportation during off-hours/days/seasons for school transportation is the easiest way to allow school buses and drivers to provide additional value to their community. Using school bus for transportation to senior centers or shopping can be a vital community service. School districts have to become savvy about figuring the true total cost of their transportation services in order to recoup a fair amount for this work. State regulation requires districts to recoup actual costs, both operational and vehicle depreciation.

Transport students on vehicles other than school buses

A third model involves school students riding on public transportation. Over 8,000 students ride public school transportation each day in Washington State. Models reviewed across the country included student use of both regular fixed route public transit and dial-a-ride services for students with disabilities. In some cases, the arrangement is formal—the school district purchases bus passes for the students or has another contractual or financial arrangement with a transit system. In some cases, it is informal—the student chooses to ride the transit bus and pays his/her own fare.

Co-mingling concerns arise in this setting as well, both from the student/parent perspective and the other adult rider perspective. Co-mingling has proved so difficult for many transit agencies that they chose to run separate buses on bus routes that, while open to the public, are clearly student buses. It is vital that school districts and transit agencies or other coordinating bodies have clear procedures for handling student behavior in partnership with the school district administrators.

Coordinate or integrate administrative functions

A final coordination model is the invisible model. This fourth model involves the coordination of operations that are not apparent to the public eye. The sharing of parking, maintenance, and paint facilities and staff, a municipal fueling system, a shared radio system, integrated driver training programs, scheduling, accident investigation and readiness, and road observations are all functions vital to the success of a transportation operation that can be shared without impinging on community values or sensibilities.

Washington coordination projects

Two Washington State coordination projects involving school transportation have been included in national studies of coordinated transportation.

The Selkirk Shuttle in Pend Oreille County was designed by the school district transportation department to provide a vital transportation link between three small towns whose residents needed access to all three towns for various medical, social services, and shopping needs. It also allowed adults who work in the school system to get to their work sites.

The Mason County afternoon transit service uses school buses with school bus drivers serving as transit drivers. The school bus is converted into a transit bus with the addition of a magnetic "Mason Transit" sign that is placed on the side of the school bus. The bus transports students participating in after school activities who have no personal transportation resources and who live outside the area served by Mason County Transit's regular routes as well as members of the general public also living in these remote areas.

Other Washington projects include:

The Pierce County Boys and Girls Club coordinate with the Bethel School district and a transportation brokering organization, Paratransit Services, Inc., to take identified at-risk students to an after school program at the Boys and Girls Club and then home.

A coordinated vehicle maintenance facility in Pend Orielle County will enable schools districts and community transportation providers to reduce costs and provide maintenance services in the county rather than taking vehicles to neighboring Spokane County.

Project descriptions are included in Appendix A.

Chapter 3   Overview of the Partners, the Resources, and the Rules

The Providers

School Districts

The Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) reimburses school districts, according to a funding formula, for transporting all students who live more than one mile from school or have transportation listed as a related service on their Individual Education Plan (IEP). Reimbursement at a lower level is available for transporting students living less than one mile from school. Students are transported by school districts on buses meeting federal and state requirements, FTA certified transit vehicles, and in passenger vehicles with a capacity of less than ten passengers. It is important to note here that the transportation of students on transit buses is regulated by FTA, and not OSPI school bus requirements.

The transportation of students on school buses is closely regulated by OSPI. School bus drivers must have a commercial driver's license and participate in a drug and alcohol-testing program as outlined by the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA). Most school districts provide a single opportunity for students to ride to school and a single opportunity to ride the school bus home in the afternoon. Participation in pre- and post-school activities often requires students to arrange non-school bus transportation, either public transportation or private car.

School districts in Washington State are not required to provide transportation to children in their school district, unless the student is disabled. However, nearly all school districts have elected to do so. The OSPI funding formula covers approximately 65 percent of the cost of transportation. Districts choosing to provide a higher level of service than financed by the funding formula must cover those costs through general funds for operations and local levy revenue. When budget pressures increase districts often revisit their commitment to transportation.

Head Start Agencies and ECEAP

Head Start Agencies or grantees were significantly involved in a number of the national coordination models studied. Head Start Agencies, while federally funded, have significant latitude in how services are designed because a tradition of local control has been part of the Head Start movement since its inception. This freedom allows agencies to be very innovative in their pursuit of coordination possibilities. Head Start Agencies are able to design their own transportation operations, to contract for transportation, or to barter for transportation. In some cases, agencies have purchased buses and given them to school districts in exchange for the district providing transportation for their children. OSPI Funding allows Head Start, Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program (ECEAP), and IEP preschoolers transported on district buses, or district-contracted buses to be counted for the funding allocation. While new requirements for Child Safety Restraint Systems (CSRS) and monitors can increase costs, this Washington funding source is unusual in its generosity. Head Start agencies have also used their transportation operations to provide services to a broader circle of social service organizations.

Some of Head Start Agencies' historic flexibility has been curtailed by transportation regulations implemented January 2001 that, within a 5-year implementation schedule, will require all Head Start transportation to be provided on school buses or Allowable Alternative Vehicles. (AAVs—These are vehicles with school bus construction, but without the yellow paint, loading lights, and side stop arm.) In addition to vehicle requirements, all drivers must possess a CDL and there must be a monitor on every bus. Training requirements are established for drivers and attendants as well as for parents and students.

This establishment of more specific requirements for the transportation of Head Start children establishes a high national standard for child transportation, but will limit coordination partners to those willing to share the cost of a more prescribed transportation system. Yet the Head Start regulations require coordination of transportation. Head Start programs are struggling to find ways to coordinate within the constraints of these new regulations.

Transit Systems

There are 26 transit systems currently operating in Washington, including 19 Public Transportation Benefit Areas (PTBAs)[1]. PTBAs operate in the more urbanized areas and are similar to transit authorities or districts in other states, in that they are organized under specific provisions of state law, have local taxing authority, operate within prescribed service boundaries, and have access to certain other state and federal transportation resources. It is estimated that over 85 percent of the state's population has access to a public transit system.

The majority of public transit agencies provide fixed route, fixed schedule bus service, and some form of demand response service. Under the provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), all new vehicles purchased by public transit systems must be fully accessible, and each system is required to offer complementary paratransit service to riders who live in the delivery area within ¾ miles of fixed route service but are unable to access fixed route bus service. The exception to this is systems that are run as route-deviated systems rather than fixed route. In this case, no complementary paratransit service is required. Ninety-seven percent of fixed route vehicles in Washington State are accessible to people utilizing wheelchairs and other mobility devices. When paratransit vehicles are counted, the number comes even closer to 100 percent.

Transit systems, once established, have control over the provision of public transportation within their service area (RCW 35.58.250). Transit agencies may contract with school districts for the use of their vehicles because transit entities have complete control over the provision of public transportation within their service area.

Community Transportation Providers

The state is also served by a network of community transportation providers. Generally, but not always, these are non-profit organizations that serve a variety of programs. Examples of these providers are the 31 local community action agencies serving low income families, 13 area agencies on aging operating nutrition and other senior programs, and numerous other human service and tribal organizations that provide a range of medical and special mobility services to agency clients and other transportation disadvantaged populations. Virtually all of the service provided by smaller community transportation agencies is demand response. PTBAs and other public transit systems frequently contract with community transportation agencies to provide accessible ADA paratransit services.

Community transportation agencies generally operate in an unstable fiscal environment. They are dependent on grants, awards from agencies such as the Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) and United Way, and on contracts with other public agencies. They do not have the resources to provide transportation services without these sources of money, which are by nature unpredictable. Thus, services expand and contract based on the receipt of grants, contracts, and gifts.

There are also private transportation providers that transport the elderly, children, people with disabilities, and the low-income. Generally they do so through contracts or reimbursement arrangements with public or non-profit agencies. More and more, the private sector is interested in opportunities to become part of coordinated community systems. In more rural settings, private sector transportation is often not present, but in suburban settings, districts seeking to use their buses for community needs will need to assess whether or not reasonable service is available from a private entity.

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[1]See Appendix B for a listing of the 26 public transit systems and their service areas.

The Resources (Funding and Expenditures)

School Districts

State revenues are provided to school districts to make school transportation service a part of public education process through two separate streams of revenue:

1. Districts are provided with annual replacement allocations for school buses in the district or contract fleet serving the district. The formula's purpose is to provide districts annual reimbursement so that at the end of the bus's useful life, necessary funds will be available to purchase a replacement bus. If a district wants to expand its bus fleet, there is no state funding to assist with that purchase. Buses in a district fleet are depreciated at the current state bid price for a comparable bus. Contract buses are reimbursed at the state bid price for that bus at the time of purchase. State payments are adjusted to account for accrued interest and salvage value.

2. Districts receive funding per student with differentials based on the distance the child lives from school, whether or not the child has an identified disability requiring special transportation services, and how many students ride on each bus daily.

The funding formula does not restrict the buses' use solely to pupil transportation. While there are unique characteristics of this funding support that impact school districts' willingness to participate in coordinated transportation, Washington regulations provide districts with broad latitude in bus use.

- The formula expects school districts to maintain buses in their fleets for a certain number of years based on a vehicle-by-vehicle schedule. If additional miles are put on a bus through coordination, vehicle life in terms of years could be shortened. Current experience suggests that no buses are retired before their designated years of life, so unless coordination had an extreme impact on mileage, early retirement is probably not an issue.

If a bus were retired early, the replacement allocations would be ended for that vehicle. Since coordinated (non-school) use of the vehicle would have generated revenue to the school districts for the actual cost of that service, the loss of replacement allocation should not be a significant issue.

- School districts may lease their buses to other community groups under two conditions, they receive reimbursement of the actual cost of operating the vehicle for that use and there is no transportation contractor willing to provide that service at a reasonable cost. Leasing then creates two dilemmas for school districts:

  1. What process must they use to determine the availability of a contractor and what is "reasonable" cost? This dilemma is not necessarily a problem for a one-time trip, but it is a very reasonable concern for entering into an ongoing community coordination consortium.

  2. Districts often find their decisions to share resources go under a microscope to see if any groups allowed to lease buses have received preferential treatment. All community groups are not the same and the school district may not want to be an inferred supporter of some groups. Schools often avoid this dilemma by not coordinating the use of their fleet with outside groups at all.

  School districts may establish the calculation of actual costs using a reasonable formula based on a clear understanding of pupil transportation costs. OSPI has created a transportation costs worksheet (Program 99) that provides one method of determining a fleet average cost per mile that can then be added to the hourly driver cost to arrive at actual cost for any particular service.

- The OSPI student reimbursement to districts recognizes Head Start, ECEAP, and other preschool passengers whose programs are housed in school buildings or are a part of the district program to be counted as passengers for reimbursement. For these programs, coordination is already a part of the OSPI funding formula. Other states do not have this generous acceptance of preschool children as qualifying passengers.

Non-student passengers on school buses in a coordinated system would obviously not count towards the total passenger count for a school bus. If a school district tried to put a significant number of coordinated passengers on a school bus to the point that student ridership were curtailed, then the district's OSPI student transportation allocation would be reduced.

- OSPI provides pupil transportation funding to school districts who put their students on transit buses. Over 8,000 Washington State students take transit buses to school under this program. Because the districts in this case do not maintain an in-house or district fleet of school buses to transport these children, OSPI does not provide the replacement allocation dollars to those districts.

  This choice to usse transit then reduces the total state dollars available to that school and community earmarked for student transportation. While there are FTA funds that pay a proportion of the costs of the transit buses, this still represents a total reduction of the state funds coming into the school district, regardless of whether or not a historical fleet existed at some point in time to kick start a replacement allocation or not. Today the existence of those historical, long replaced buses has little impact on a school district's finances.

  While state regulation clearly pays for metropolitan transit passes or tickets, it is not as clear what of the many incarnations of rural transit would meet the definition of "common carriers in the urban transportation of students, e.g., the transportation of students via a municipal transportation system."

- State support for school bus purchases is designed as a replacement allocation strategy, because at the time of implementation, school districts already had fleets of school buses and the formula was created to maintain those existing fleets. The cost of increasing the size of the school bus fleet to create additional capacity to meet the needs of a growing school population or community coordinated transportation systems must be borne entirely by the school district because the state formula is designed only for reimbursement.

Similarly, if districts want to purchase school buses with additional equipment to be ADA as well as Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) school bus compliant for the purposes of coordinating with other community needs, the increased upfront price of the bus would have to be borne by the school district.

The cost of any of that additional equipment that was a state supported school bus option could be recouped over time through the reimbursement formula. Again, because the district is required to recoup actual costs of all leased services, these additional vehicle and equipment costs would have to be figured into the coordination agreement.

- As already alluded to above, school districts may lease their school buses with little restriction as long as the lessee pays the actual cost of the vehicle's use (operating and equipment) and as long as there are no contractors able to provide the same service at a "reasonable" cost. Neither the legislature nor the courts have defined "reasonable." This "reasonable" cost clause hangs like a cloud over any decision by a school district to enter into a coordinated system. School districts are afraid that after all the work to establish a coordinated system, they will be swept aside by a contract operation claiming its rights to provide the service.

Head Start and ECEAP

Head Start funding and ECEAP funding is as varied as the program providers. Head Start is a federal program that funds local Early and regular Head Start programs directly. Local control is a keystone for Head Start and the program design, curriculum, and community values are established at the local level. In January 2001, Head Start transportation requirements were established for all children transported to and from Head Start programs.

ECEAP is a Washington State program with very similar goals to Head Start that often works collaboratively with Head Start at the local level in providing child and family services. ECEAP also has transportation guidelines, but for programs not associated with school districts—which must follow OSPI School Transportation regulations—the guidelines are much less restrictive in terms of both drivers and vehicles.

Both of these programs are encouraged through regulation to seek multiple funding streams, including in kind donations and collaborative relationships with other agencies. For transportation, this collaboration is often with a school district. Funding specific to transportation is not established as a separate funding stream in either of these programs, so each agency or center must establish a transportation budget as part of regular grant requests or in response to one time availability to special funding streams.

While this lack of earmarked funds can be a negative, the lack of strict funding requirements allows Head Start Grantees to do unusual things like purchase school buses and give them to school districts in exchange for the districts picking up the center's children. This is a win/win because once the school district owns the bus, OSPI will pay it replacement allocation to maintain that bus and its respective offspring in the fleet.

Transit Funding

Public Transportation Benefit Areas (PTBAs) and other public transit systems rely on federal, state, and local resources to support their operations.

Local Funding

The bulk of funding for transit systems comes from local taxes. The tax rate for local transit systems in Washington cannot exceed 0.9%, and is approved by vote of the people within the transit service area.

State Funding

The state also provides funding for local transit system. Prior to the passage of Initiative 695 in November 2000, a significant portion of the Motor Vehicle Excise Tax ($259 million in 1999) was distributed to transit systems. After the people expressed their displeasure with this tax, the legislature eliminated the tax in the 2001 legislative session. As a result, transit systems throughout the state cut back on services. Many areas have voted to increase local taxes to partially make up the lost revenue. However, even by applying the maximum tax rate, systems cannot operate at the same level as prior to the elimination of the MVET.

On May 19, 2003, Governor Gary Locke signed into law a 10-year plan for funding transportation that included over $250 million for public

transportation programs over 10 years. The 2003 Legislative Transportation Funding Package provided these new public transportation grants for 2003-2005 projects:

- $4 million for new ParaTransit/Special Needs Grants. Nonprofit providers statewide competed for these funds that must be used solely for additional services.

- $14 million for new ParaTransit/Special Needs Grants. Transit agencies statewide were eligible for these formula-based grants. The funds were used solely for additional services for special needs transportation for persons who, because of their age (youth or seniors), disabilities, or income status, are unable to provide or purchase their own transportation.

- $1.5 million for new Commute Trip Reduction Performance Grants. The funds were available to public agencies, nonprofit organizations, developers, and property managers that provide financial incentives to employees for ridesharing, using public transportation, car sharing, or using nonmotorized commuting.

- $4.5 million business and occupation tax credit available to private businesses that are investing their own funds in reducing drive-alone commuting.

- $10 million in new Rural Mobility Grants. $6 million was provided to transit agencies in small cities and rural areas according to a formula that equalizes disparity in local tax collection.
$4 million was distributed through a competitive
grant process focused on areas where public transportation is limited or does not exist.

- $4 million for a new Vanpool Grant Program. The funds were available to public transit agencies for capital costs only. Washington has the largest publicly-owned vanpool fleet in the country, comprised of more than 1,500 vans statewide. The number of vanpools in the Puget Sound area increased 87 percent between 1993 and 2003.

- $3 million for the city of Seattle for a streetcar on South Lake Union.

Federal Funds

The amount of core federal funding available to most urban transit systems is specifically designated in annual appropriations bills. For example, all of the $77 million available in formula assistance funds available in FY 2001 was specifically allocated by Congress to the following cities: Seattle, Spokane, Tacoma, Bellingham, Bremerton, Longview, Olympia, Yakima, and to the tri-city area made up of Richland/Kennewick/Pasco. In 2000, federal operating funds constituted 1 percent of the operating revenue for transit systems.

An additional $90 million in federal capital assistance was earmarked and distributed to designated communities to purchase buses and facilities and to support commuter rail projects.

The Federal Transit Administration also administers a number of grant programs, which provide grants for specific purposes such as intercity transportation, bus purchasing, transportation for seniors and people with disabilities, rural services, and transportation to get low-income people to jobs and job-related services. Transit systems in Washington have been successful in obtaining such grant funds. Grant programs do not provide stable funding sources and must be reapplied for each year or every other year.

Funds from the FTA come with many strings attached. This creates some restrictions on how funds can be used.
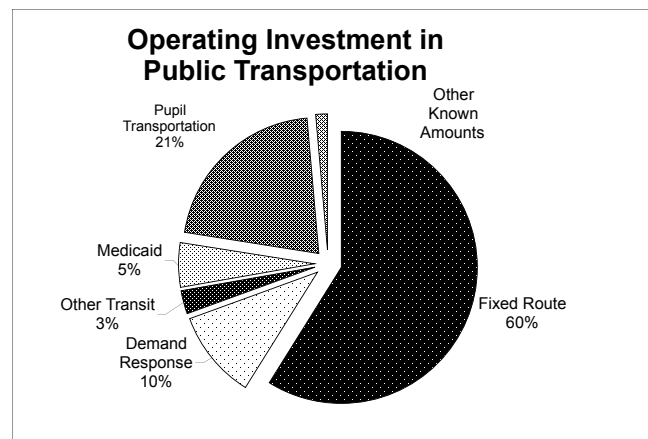
Community Transportation

Community transportation is also funded through a mix of federal, state, and local funds, as well as donations or grants from charitable foundations. A recent federal General Accounting Office study found 62 federal programs that fund a variety of transportation services for the transportation disadvantaged, most of which are administered by the Departments of Health and Human Services, Labor, Education, and Transportation. Funds from these programs are generally passed to state and local agencies for distribution and administration. State or local matching funds are often required. In addition, the state and local governments provide funds for transportation purposes, generally through grant programs.

Public programs use theses funds to purchase services from community transportation providers for a specific client population or a specific purpose.

Transportation Funding in Washington State

Since many state agencies do not track client transportation expenditures, it is difficult to know exactly how much is being spent on mobility services in Washington State. The following is an estimate based on what is known. Actual expenditures could be considerably more.

School districts are eligible to receive grants from some of the public programs listed here, and might do so as they participate in community coordination projects.

Operating Investment in Public Transportation: Fixed Route 60%, Pupil Transportation 21%, Demand Response 10%, Medicaid 5%, Other Transit 3%, Other Known Amounts

The Rules and Corresponding Philosophical Rationales (Federal and State Statutory Environment)

School Districts

Vehicles

The school bus must meet all state and federal requirements for school buses. Federal regulations are in the form of Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS). All motor vehicles are required to meet certain FMVSSs. School buses have additional standards that are specific to school buses, including roof strength, joint strength, seating design, mirror system, window retention, fuel system protection, and special

warning lights to control traffic. Since 1977, most school bus related regulatory work has focused on improving the school bus to ensure that it offers a high level of safety through conspicuity, motorist warning devices, seating design, and mirror systems. The result is 36 federal motor vehicle safety standards have been established to govern the construction of school buses.

While these standards leave little flexibility in the design of school buses, they are not as rigid as it first appears. The school buses that are most often purchased and that have proved less than successful for adult transportation have been built for maximized capacity and minimum cost. Increased seat spacing, extended headroom, shorted entrance step height, ADA lifts, air conditioning, and air ride suspension are just a few of the options available that can make a vehicle meeting school bus standards more usable for other applications, especially for the transportation of adults.

School bus manufacturers also market vehicles to transit operators. The vehicles are the same in many aspects of their construction, but are outfitted to meet the needs and traditions of the separate industries. Designing a bus that meets school bus standards and is also acceptable to the transit environment, included compliance with ADA, is a challenge that was undertaken by the California Department of Education. Their "hybrid" bus meets the functional and regulatory requirements of both industries. The only impediment to such a vehicle being purchased for dual use by a transit operator is the requirement for the vehicle to be put through the transit bus testing process at the Altoona, Pennsylvania Testing Facility.

Driver Qualifications

Federal Commercial Driver's License requirements set licensing guidelines for bus drivers in terms of license testing, bus driver physicals, and drug and alcohol testing. School bus drivers must meet additional standards that have been established at the state level because of their direct unsupervised contact with school children and because the safety of transported school children is a strong community value. While the

differences between school bus drivers and other bus drivers can create somewhat of a barrier to coordination, the complete lack of licensing requirements for some agencies using vehicles seating less than 15 passengers creates a even wider dichotomy in skills and screening between the drivers of school or other buses and paid or volunteer drivers who because of the vehicle they are driving are not required to meet Commercial Driver's Licensing requirements.

Mason County Transit cross-trained school bus drivers to provide transit services. The same can be done for all driver qualifications. The challenge to regulators is to assist operators in evaluating the relevance of dual standards where they exist. If FTA and CDL drug and alcohol standards are essentially equivalent, either standard should be allowed to meet the requirement for the other. If the driver in one industry needs an annual physical and the other a biennial physical, then it would be a simple mater to have all cross-qualified drivers to have an annual physical. Cross trained drivers would not only have to be trained to understand the workings of both systems' procedures and philosophies, but also given training in making the mental shift between modes.

Head Start

On January 18, 2001, Head Start transportation moved from being one of the least regulated to most regulated transportation modes in the country. While many school transportation requirements are set at the state level and vary widely from state to state, Head Start transportation guidelines are now set at the federal level for all Head Start Agencies. Implementations of various parts of this regulation occur between the date of the regulation and 2006.

Vehicles

All vehicles, by 2006, must meet federal school bus standards for school bus construction with the allowable exception of color and warning devices—flashing lights and stop arms. This vehicle without lights and stop arm is defined as an "Allowable Alternative Vehicle", or AAV. All children under 50 lbs. must be seated in appropriate CSRS. Head Start Grantees are able to continue to use any previously purchased vehicles with increasingly prohibitive guidelines until 2006, but all newly purchased vehicles must meet the new standards. The new regulation also requires Head Starts to pursue coordination with other local agencies, but the stringent vehicle specifications and the need to secure CSRS's make transportation of Head Start children on other agencies' vehicles, except school districts', unlikely.

The AAV, while creating a new class of vehicles that may be attractive to agencies not wanting their vehicles to look like school buses, also creates a new regulatory hurdle. School buses are specifically exempted from the requirements of ADA. Once the vehicle is no longer a school bus, it must have an ADA-approved entrance and lift rather than a typical school bus lift and the fleet may then need to be designed to fully comply with ADA fleet requirements. This wrinkle has not been completely discussed and evaluated at the federal level, and the newly defined "Multifunction School Activity Bus" may be included in the ADA exemption to overcome this barrier. Be sure to follow this issue.

Vehicle Staff (Drivers and Monitors)

The regulations require all Head Start buses to have a monitor on board at all times. All drivers must have a CDL, regardless of the size vehicle they are driving. Specific pre-service and in-service training requirements that amount to about 30 hours preservice and 8 hours of annual inservice are outlined in the regulation for both drivers and monitors. These requirements for drivers again make the cross use of other agencies' transportation unlikely, particularly if that agency uses volunteer, non-CDL drivers.

Transit Systems

Vehicles

The transportation of general public riders is governed by a complex array of federal and state legislation and local mandates, with administrative responsibility scattered among federal transit and highway agencies, state departments of transportation, public utility commissions and other public agencies. In addition to separate rules for the operation of local, in-state, intercity, and interstate transportation, there are specific design, construction and testing requirements governing public transit vehicles. For example, vehicles used to transport passengers across state lines are subject to provisions of the Interstate Commerce Act, which affect, among other things, minimum liability insurance requirements. Similarly, while both school and transit buses must meet certain Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS), transit vehicles purchased with federal funds must also meet ADA accessibility guidelines and be Altoona tested on specific performance specifications at the federally operated bus testing facility. While this testing doesn't require specific performance, it is an extensive process and school buses have not been tested.

Vehicle Replacement

The sometimes conflicting and distinct regulatory environments surrounding pupil and public transportation is frequently cited as a major impediment to coordinating school, public and community transportation. A further complicating factor is the separate vehicle replacement cycle established by federal and state agencies. Washington State replaces locally purchased school buses based solely on the number of years the vehicle has been in service, regardless of miles or condition. However, the effective lifespan of transit vehicles purchased with federal funds is determined by either the number of years and/or accumulated mileage prescribed for specific categories of vehicles.

Driver Qualifications and Training

According to TCRP's Report 56, <u>Integrating School Bus and Public Transportation Services in Non-Urban Communities</u>, driver qualifications, screening and training are roughly commensurate between the pupil transportation and public transit industries. However, there is no uniform, proscribed standard for hiring and training transit drivers, and approaches vary considerably from community to community. These are essentially local issues to be worked out by individual transit agencies, frequently in cooperation with their employees' union.

Increasingly, however, both public transit and community transportation agencies are requiring fingerprinting, criminal background checks, and special licensing for drivers in addition to routine DMV checks of driving and accident histories. Federal regulations require that any commercial vehicle operator driving a vehicle with a capacity of 15 passengers or more must possess a Commercial Drivers' License. Driver training practices also vary among transit systems, but usually include courses in defensive driving, passenger assistance techniques, CPR, First Aid, ADA sensitivity, customer services, the handling of blood-borne pathogens, and related topics.

Training is a perfect example of the fact that logic clearly dictates coordination practices that are not required by law. Transit is exempted from all school bus requirements, so transit drivers are not required to be trained, as school bus drivers must, in student management or working with school district personnel. Since transit establishes requirements for training at the local level rather than responding to state or federal mandates, school bus drivers could step into a transit role without training. Common sense dictates, while no regulation exists, that when drivers are asked to serve a different clientele than the one they have been trained for, they need additional training. Mason County Transit has done exactly this in preparing school bus drivers to serve the general public in a transit role.

Drug and Alcohol Testing

By law, all paid drivers and maintenance personnel in federally funded transit programs must be enrolled in approved testing programs for alcohol and illegal drugs and other substances. As required by the U.S. Department of Transportation, covered transit employees must submit to pre-employment, post accident, and random testing. School bus drivers must participate in a virtually identical program defined by Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration (FMCSA) for all not FTA commercial drivers.

Bus Safety Standards

NHTSA requires vehicles purchased for the transport of children to meet school bus standards, while FTA regulations prohibit the purchase of school buses because they have not been tested as transit vehicles, even though in certain aspects, such as the seating compartment, they are safer designs. These dueling standards make the specification of dual use vehicles a challenge. There is confusion about the applicability of school bus-specific requirements when a community is trying to buy buses and vans that will transport children and families to after-school child care, supportive services for families trying to enter the workforce, or activities like those of Head Start programs. In many communities, there is a very real need to transport children and families in coordinated, community-based settings. In smaller communities, providers attempting to serve children and the public are caught between these two conflicting regulations.
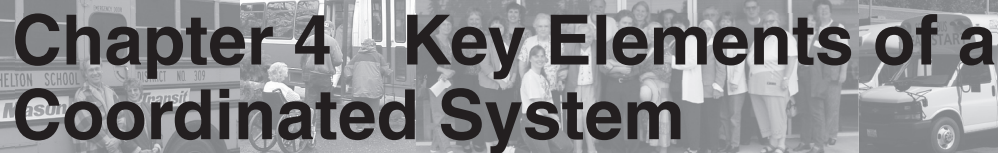
FTA School Transportation Regulations

Federal transit regulations all but prohibit public transit agencies from providing exclusive school transportation services, even occasionally, unless there are no private school bus operators available and capable of providing such service. However, public transit agencies can transport students on regular, "open door" transit routes, including providing tripper service[2]. Many in the transit industry think that the separation of school and transit bus operations in all conditions is far too inflexible in today's environment, where many communities are struggling to achieve sustainable efficiencies in both their education and transit systems. It is argued that local communities should have the ability to integrate and coordinate these services to best meet local needs. *(Pursuant to 69 U.S.C. 5323(f) and 49 CFR Part 605, "recipients of federal transit assistance may not engage in school bus operations exclusively for the transportation of students and school personnel in competition with private school bus operators unless qualified under specified exemptions. When operating exclusive school bus service under allowable exemption, recipients may not use federally funded equipment, vehicles or facilities.")*

Community Transportation

Unlike school transportation and transit systems, community transportation doesn't have a specific set of rules and regulations that drive and constrain how it operates. Rather, community transportation is subject to the requirements of its funding sources and grant awards, each of which has its own set of parameters around client eligibility, trip purpose, geography, minimum qualifications, and other items. A barrier to coordinated transportation is the lack of grant requirements that force recipients to purchase vehicles that are suitable for coordination. If a social agency buys a 15-passenger van and states that it may not be used for transportation of school children, the opportunity for coordination is lost.

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[2]"Tripper service" means regularly scheduled public transit service that is open to the general public, but which may be designed or modified to meet the needs of students.

Basic Coordinating Questions

There are basic questions that must be answered in the pursuit of coordination. If a coordination plan does not yield "yes" answers to these questions, it will probably not be successful. Projects must meet both the letter and the spirit of the law, and must be achievable.

- **Is it legal?** Coordination often seeks to provide service in a way that is somewhat unconventional, but breaking state or federal laws governing the transportation of a specific mode is not only unwise, but the potential liability could harm a community financially.

- **Is it reasonable?** Be sure the vehicle and activity is a good match. Staff must have the resources and training necessary to successfully serve the coordinated purposes.

- **Is there commitment?** Starting a coordination project takes a lot of commitment and energy. One enthusiastic partner cannot compensate for an uncommitted one. Be aware that failed coordination is remembered for a long time.

- **Does it make things better?** Is there enough increase in service to warrant the effort involved in planning and executing the project? If coordination seems like too much effort for the potential outcome, it won't last long.

Equipment

The case for sharing vehicles (two and two make five!)

Every transportation system has peaks and valleys of service demand and faces unpredictable occurrences. Because of this, it is necessary to maintain more buses than are generally put on the road on any given day. Unexpected events can stretch resources to the breaking point; unplanned maintenance or road calls, waiting for an ordered part, a postponed trip

needs to go the same day another trip has already been planned, or a major community gathering of individuals who also make up the majority of your para-transit ridership. Sometimes a single broken lift can bring a system to its figurative knees. Sharing vehicles can be the answer.

If two different types of systems exist side by side, such as a school bus fleet and a transit fleet or a Head Start Agency and a senior center, the respective schedules and service demands of the two fleets will most likely not be identical, yet there will be overlap. As long as the vehicles of one fleet meet the necessary standards for the other fleet, this non-alignment of demand allows one fleet to serve as a backup or extra capacity for the other. When planning coordination, system components must be looked at with some detail. For instance, a school district may decide not to transport school children in a vehicle that does not have seating that meets school bus standards. This would not preclude the transportation of a student in a wheelchair on a bus without school bus seating. The wheelchair securement system on the transit bus is identical to the system in a school bus.

If each fleet has five backup vehicles, the two fleets combined have ten backup vehicles, essentially adding capacity to both operations without additional investment. Is careful planning necessary to turn this mathematical hypothesis into a real world advantage? Absolutely. If the transit agency needs to pick up a dial-a-ride client in a wheelchair and the school district has just sent the lift bus out to pick up ambulatory students, an opportunity for successful coordination has passed.

Coordination partners will continue to find more ways to support each other's operations. The expanded capacity of shared fleets will not only make the provision of current service more doable, it also allows both partners to seek new service offerings, as happened in Mason County.

The existing public investment

Virtually every vehicle that can be a part of cooperative coordination efforts with school bus fleets will have been purchased with public funds. This sweeping (and true) statement would at first blush make coordination seem to be an "All for one, and one for all" type of activity. Unfortunately, nothing could be further from the truth. While purchased with public funds, the list of different "pots" of money that vehicles can be purchased from is extensive. Local school districts, legislative funding implemented by OSPI and managed by Regional Coordinators, WSDOT, Federal Transit Administration, and significant budget dollars from Head Starts and other social agencies all spend significant money on fleet purchase and operation. The question each asks going into coordination is, "Will my customers end up with more or less service, will there be more or less wear and tear on my fleet, more or less hours for my drivers?"

It is unfair to label this simply as selfishness or a "what's in it for me" attitude, this is simply an effort on the part of each manager to be sure that his or her agency's investment makes the maximum return. In addition, tracking ROI (return on investment) and appropriateness of shared vehicles for the coordinated use, each agency must be sure that the guidelines imposed by the funding entity allow coordinated service. If guidelines prohibit shared use, a petition for a variance to promote coordination should be submitted. Federal, state, and local dollars represent a public investment in communities all over this country. Prohibitions that prevent communities from receiving full value from this public investment are counter-productive and should be challenged.

Riders

The case for flexibility in mixing riders

Discussion of co-mingling leads, not unexpectedly, to the recounting of horror stories. There is a horror story for every possible commingling imagined. The veracity of the tale is unimportant; every new idea will be challenged as a possible disaster. In fact, as CNN brings every story of violence and abuse around the country into our living rooms, it is easy to decide that violence lurks around every corner. In fact, the individuals involved in coordination as drivers and passengers are the same people one would sit next to at the ballpark or movies, shop next to in the mall, or go to church with us.

It is important to remember that coordination takes place within a finite community—your community. Decisions that are made to undertake coordination are made by the very individuals and neighbors of individuals who will be participating in this system. These are not strangers to the mores of the community, in fact, most of them are supporters and would, if necessary, be defenders of the mores of the community. Co-mingling decisions should be made not with an expectation of difficulty, but with openness to the possibilities of the development of mutual understanding that can occur between different user groups.

Who uses school buses, transit buses, and community transportation today

Who rides school buses today is almost as important a question as who doesn't ride school buses. Of course, eligible K-12 students may ride the school bus. Some of these students are teen moms who bring their babies on the school bus. These babies and district pre-school programs mean more children in child safety restraint systems. Field, sport, and activity trips have multiplied with expanded academic and athletic programs; and students often attend vocational programs at one school and academic programs at another. Students whose district provides transportation via municipal transportation have greater options for travel times, avoiding the restrictions of school bus schedules, although transit features such as transfers can lengthen ride times.

At the same time that school buses are doing more than ever, expanding activities and programs mean that many students need to find alternative transportation for activities before and after school. Finally, changing lifestyles that mean few "stay at home" moms or dads makes waiting for the school bus impossible in many households. These logistical problems, added to the general feeling, especially among older students, that the school bus is not "cool," mean many students get to and from school other ways.

Alternative means of transportation can mean non-district reimbursed use of transit or transportation via personal vehicles, the risk of which has been discussed earlier.

Transit bus riders get on board for a variety of reasons. Many choose transit every day to avoid the hassle of bringing a vehicle downtown, to remain a one-car family, or to protect the environment. Others are without personal transportation and use transit to meet personal and work responsibilities.

Specialized forms of public community transportation bring individuals to medical appointments, shopping, church, social engagements, and many more activities. Much of this transportation is provided in a demand response mode. Specific trips are scheduled for the specific client needing service. The people using these services fall generally into the category of individuals identified in the ACCTS legislation as individuals with special transportation needs *"including their personal attendants, who because of physical or mental disability, income status, or age are unable to transport themselves or purchase transportation."*

Barriers to coordinated transportation arising out of user characteristics and needs include scheduling mismatches, uncertainty about alternative vehicle design, discomfort with bus ridership in general, differences in ridership age and attitude, and reluctance to give up the "personal" service they received before they started sharing "their" vehicle with other coordinated riders.

Jobs and Benefits

Implications for current employees

Rumors of a new way of doing things understandably throw fear into the hearts of employees. Coordination can appear to be an attempt to "take away" hours and jobs from a group of employees. Coordination is not usually designed to reduce services; it is designed to provide more service with the resources at hand. Generally, this means the same number of vehicles providing service in more ways, resulting in increased hours for employees because of multiple funding streams. The ACCT vision is to remove transportation as a barrier to fill participation in the community. Accomplishing this task, no mater how efficiently it is done, will result in more, not less jobs.

Current labor environment

The jobs of community transportation and school bus drivers are often low paying part-time jobs, often with no benefits. This adds to the nervousness that bus drivers feel when coordination is discussed. The available applicant pool for these jobs depends, as do most service industry jobs, on the economy. When the economy is strong, more attractive jobs are available and when the economy is weak, more bus driver applicants step forward.

Additional hours created through the development of coordinated transportation projects should increase the hours worked by bus drivers and make the job more attractive. Increasing the quality of current bus driver jobs is clearly preferable to new inadequately used vehicle capacity and creating additional low quality employment every time a new agency gets funds for transportation. A sidebar to this observation is that traditionally a new part-time transportation service for social service agencies is implemented in 15-passenger vans, that have been identified by NHTSA (National Highway Traffic Safety Administration) as highly unsafe and prone to rollovers, driven by untrained non-CDL drivers.

Wages, benefits, unionization, cross training, driver pools, etc.

Wage differentials among systems can be a barrier to successful coordination. There is no magic bullet that will settle the concerns about drivers from another agency or union driving passengers that "belong" to another mode. Including drivers and union representatives in the planning for coordination will be a great advantage in gaining union understanding and acceptance of new ideas. Local solutions must be worked out. Generally, drivers will remain employees of their own operation that has contracted to provide coordinated service for another mode.

If drivers are to work across modes while driving their own vehicle, or be a part of a driver pool servicing multiple modes, they must be trained and certified to meet the requirements of each mode.

Community Perspective and Priorities

Identifying community values

The process of choosing to coordinate requires careful decisions about organizations, their clientele, and the community. What is appropriate and what is not appropriate for a specific community is a community issue. Some communities may find that required specifications are sufficient protection for their passengers. Some may want additional safety or comfort features to be a part of every vehicle purchase. Some may feel that specifications that meet the spirit of the law or regulation as they understand it are all that is necessary. Further choices can be made about vehicles used every day versus vehicles used occasionally as backup. Driver choice, screening, and training also present choices about minimum regulatory requirements, special training to meet community standards, or accepting that drivers may be unfamiliar with modal differences.

Involvement of both planners and users is key to successful outcomes and a plan that matches community values and needs. Discovering that you can't bring your morning coffee onto a school bus, or that it can take five minutes to load a wheelchair, are examples of unexpected inconveniences alliviated through good planning and communication.

Responding to consumer and community preferences

Consideration of the sharing or purchase of vehicles to meet the needs of more than a single organization or agency is a two-step process that should not be taken lightly. The shared vehicle and/or driver must truly meet the needs of the coordinated passengers. If the coordinated vehicle and driver does not meet the needs of the situation, coordination will be unsuccessful and the goals of coordination will be set back.

For instance, sending a non-ADA compliant school bus out to find that a customer needs ADA accessibility could create negative publicity within the community of persons with disabilities. Sending a vehicle such as a standard 15-passenger van used by many social service agencies to pick up school children when the sale of such vehicles are prohibited for the transportation of school children would not only create negative publicity, but also liability for the school district. Sending a driver with a criminal history of sexual abuse of children to pick up a school child because the coordinating agency is not required to do a criminal history check could be similarly disastrous.

A strategy for involving the public

Once a plan for collaboration has been formed with input from operators, user groups, and governmental representatives, the public must become informed and excited. Ceremonies and events, such a parades down Main Street with the combined fleets of the coordinating agencies or of newly purchased multi-purpose vehicles, or a picnic for user groups to meet, or the reading of government proclamations can be effective ways to announce the new system. Press releases, opportunities to be interviewed, free one-day passes, or offering free shuttle transportation for community events can all be ways to introduce the system to potential users and supporters.

The best source of positive publicity or of highlighting the problems that could be solved through coordination; the basketball player that led her team to a state championship because she was able to ride the transit bus home after practice, the person who was able to get off public assistance because he could ride the school bus to his new job in town, the grandmother who could go to her doctor's appointment in the church van before the senior citizen luncheon to receive her needed treatments, or the teen mom who was able to drop off her baby at day care on the way to work. These are all stories about real people whose lives were improved by access to transportation services. Once the concept of coordination becomes a community value, the public will be the source of ideas for the next new service.

Chapter 5 Coordination—Making It Happen

Join Your Local Coalition

Many counties in Washington have formed coalitions to coordinate transportation services for children, people with low incomes, the elderly, and people with disabilities. The coalitions include representatives from the organizations that provide, purchase, fund, use, or arrange for transportation for this target population—people with special transportation needs.

Local coalitions are developing coordinated transportation systems to meet community needs. They are groups of local people solving local problems. If you are thinking about forming one, visit www.wsdot.wa.gov/acct

Pick the Low-Hanging Fruit—Openness to Serendipity

Extensive study of successful coordinated transportation systems in the Transportation Cooperative Research Report 70 determined that the most important factor in coordination success was identifying a pressing need that could be directly addressed through a novel plan to share service and resources. There is never an "always do this first" strategy. Simply copying a successful model would not guarantee success because it was successful elsewhere. While some first steps may seem obvious, because they are precipitated by an unexpected event such as the closing of the only gas station in town, the best first step may not be immediately apparent.

While serendipity may be how good ideas for coordination happen, simply waiting for serendipity is not going to lead to coordination success. The oft repeated phrase, "The harder I work, the luckier I get" is appropriate here. Representatives of different transportation modes must get to know each other and each other's operations, fleets, schedules, and driver qualifications. Without this knowledge, the serendipitous moment that links unmet need with unused capacity will be missed.

Start simple and finish big

The first coordination project should meet certain guidelines that will increase its probability of success.

It has clear advantages for both coordinating entities. One side should not be dragged to the table and force-fed the reasoning that this is a good idea. Once coordination has a track record, it will be easier to undertake projects with one-sided advantages, knowing that ultimately it is a win/win for the community.

The effort to make the project a success should not fall unevenly on the coordinating entities. Even with one very enthusiastic agency, a project will not succeed solely on the efforts of one individual or organization.

It should not cost a lot of money. If coordination is a new idea, gaining acceptance will be difficult for expensive projects. Even if grant money is available for startup, projects should have a longer-term possibility of success than one-time funding.

The easiest start up is designed to meet an immediate need with unused capacity. Such a plan requires the training of staff, passengers, and public about the upcoming service and research to be sure that the plan does not conflict with regulatory requirements.

If there is a pressing need for new service or fleet support structures, look to develop functions that can serve multiple agencies. For instance, if the town has poor access to fueling or maintenance facilities, design a project that will meet the needs of more than one of the area passenger vehicle fleets.

Don't overlook little opportunities. Remember a "fleet" can be a single vehicle owned by a day care center, church, group home, or other social service agency. A fleet of one has the same support service needs as a fleet of 100. It has even greater problems scheduling maintenance and repairs. Despite its small size however, a fleet of one can have unused capacity—empty seats and off-hours of availability. Similarly, coordination between two fleets of 10 vehicles can start with sharing a single route or destination.

Identify Immediate Opportunities

For a detailed strategy for developing a county coordinated transportation system the ACCT document, "Improving Transportation for People with Special Transportation Needs through Coordination" (download from ACCT web site at www.wsdot.wa.gov/acct) is an excellent resource. Opportunities to seek coordination may happen most successfully through an extensive analysis of county resources or simply through "following your nose" to a good idea. The following questions are designed to help identify coordination possibilities in your community by a shared discussion of the goals, resources, and needs of community transportation services.

Where do your vehicles go? When do they go there? Are there empty seats? Can you accomplish that service co-mingling passengers on shared vehicles?

Be especially sure to identify strange places your vehicles go or where they go almost empty. Other providers may have matching small passenger groups needing to get to the same place. Others might have customers that need to get from your destination back to your origin – a reverse commute from the needs of your passengers and a trip your are driving as empty deadhead miles. Possibilities for handling remote destinations include; one provider pays the other to transport both providers' passengers, one provides morning transportation, the other provides the afternoon trip home; one provider takes both providers' passengers to one remote location and the other returns the favor to another remote location; or one provider provides transportation to a transfer point and the other completes the rest of the trip.

What hours of the day, days of the week, and times of year that are your vehicles idle? Are your drivers and maintenance people available during those times?

Don't limit your imagination in answering these questions. Vehicles, drivers, and support functions should all be considered separately. For instance, a school bus may be unused on the weekend, but no support services are available. It could be operated out of a transit garage for a coordinated purpose over the weekend. Special events such as the Olympics demonstrate this kind of thinking as they design a temporary transportation system. They bring in buses from multiple locations, drivers from multiple locations, and managers from multiple locations to hold it all together. Each individual knows their job and commits to becoming an instant "system." As long as drivers are cross-trained, cross-licensed, and the pieces do not have to fit together in their usual order.

Whose needs do you currently meet through your transportation system? What additional needs can your system meet with coordination?

Do you do the best you can to meet customer expectations, but you just don't have the money, vehicles, and drivers to provide all the services that have been suggested? Is there a need for transportation to and from schools before and after the regular school bus runs? Is there a need for transportation in remote locations not currently served by your system, but served by another system for their passengers? Are there special events that go begging for transportation because you don't have enough excess capacity to meet everybody's needs?

How do you provide the support services for your fleet?

Analyze your resources and/or how you accomplish maintenance work, garage facilities, vehicle washing, paint and bodywork, road calls, accident investigation, radio communication, dispatching, fueling, vehicle parking, staff training, payroll, staff supervision, customer relations, driver evaluation including on the road observation, and regulatory compliance including drug and alcohol testing, driver physicals, and driver licensing.

As you discuss these areas with other providers, what are the areas in which you shine, what are the areas where you need help? Identify areas where you can share fleet support services. For liability protection all agreements must at least include a memorandum of understanding, if not a contract between governing agencies—even if the coordination does not involve the exchange of monies.

Start by trying to identify ways you can swap or trade support services so that arranging payment for services doesn't become an immediate hassle or barrier. Remember, the sharing of these services does not carry the stigmas of co-mingling of passengers. It will raise little public notice, and when people hear about it they will simply say, "That really makes a lot of sense."

What are the real world options for vehicle selection and coordination?

There are many management and training issues to be solved in order to have a successful coordination project. While additional training or qualifications for drivers and other operational staff have definite costs, the big cost for coordinating different modes of service is in vehicle choice and specification. Some surprising options exist:

1. A school district can become a 5311, rural Coordinated Community Transportation Provider and become the lead transportation agency for their geographic area. This would allow the district to tap into 5311 funds for vehicle purchase.

2. A community agency can become a Charter Party Carrier and provide a wide range of services beyond those directly associated with their agency.

3. School bus manufacturers, sensing the opportunity and potential demand for community transportation vehicles meeting Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) school bus requirements are beginning to have school buses Altoona tested so they can be purchased with FTA funds. This will allow transit providers to buy school buses, or vehicles equipped with an allowed subset of FMVSS.

4. If a favorable interpretation exists to define publicly or privately owned rural transportation systems as "transit," then school children can ride on these vehicles as well.

5. The newly defined "Multifunction School Activity Bus (MFSAB)" may provide a design that many agencies can use in place of the traditional 15-passenger vans that are prohibited from school service and have been identified as "unsafe," especially when fully loaded, for passenger transportation. The MFSAB can be ordered to seat 15-passengers so it can be driven without a CDL license for non-school or Head Start transportation.

Chapter 6   Future Trends

Legislative Demonstration

During the course of ACCT's School/Community Transportation Coordination Project, considerable interest was expressed by legislative staff, state program administrators, and other stakeholders in the idea of a pupil transportation coordination demonstration. The discussed demonstration project would be based on enabling legislation that would allow the pooling or blending of state agency funds and provide for flexibility between existing categorical programs and in testing how school transportation, human service client, and public transportation funds can be used to accomplish the coordinated delivery of services to each group. At a minimum, key partners and participating agencies in the demonstration project would include the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, the Department of Transportation, the Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation, and the Department of Social and Health Services.

Consolidate Funding Streams

Consideration of the possibilities presented by coordination naturally leads to the question, "Why doesn't the community standardize and coordinate the use of all vehicles available?" Consolidation of all the state, local, and federal money spent on transportation services would create an opportunity to match services with needs in the most efficient way. Vehicles that are only needed for a specific program on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday would be doing something else the other days. Drivers who currently are part-time would be working full-time to meet a broad spectrum of community needs. Vehicles would be designed to meet both the needs of adult community riders and school children.

Each funding source would have to be persuaded that a coordinated system is not only a good investment, but it is the only responsible way to invest transportation dollars in a community.

Waive Some State and Federal Regulations While Maintaining Community Values and Philosophical Goals of Legislation

In order to make community consolidation a reality, the funding sources would have to agree to allow local decisions to be made about how to provide coordinated service. Secondly, the training and certification of drivers along with the design of vehicles must be planned. In order to design systems that truly meet the community's needs, it may be necessary to receive waivers of vehicle and operation standards as well in addition to the relaxation of use restrictions from funding sources. A current Transportation Research Board study is reported to be seeking school/transit demonstration projects. ACCT and Washington State should follow this project as a potential funding source.

It is imperative that extensive research into both legislative intent and community values precede any requests to modify existing statutes. Possible ideas for consideration of waivers might include:

- Cross-acceptance of FTA and FMCSA drug and alcohol programs.

- Allow FTA-funded programs to purchase school bus design vehicles such as the Head Start "Allowable Alternative Vehicle" meeting school bus Federal Motor Vehicle Safety Standards (FMVSS) without the requirement of Altoona testing.

- Identify the bounds of "reasonable" in RCW 28.A.160 that states that school districts may enter into and be protected in lease/coordination projects if no reasonable contractor services are available at the time of the establishment of the agreement.

■ In order to encourage alternative transportation models, allow school districts to receive full Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) funding, per student funding as well as a generic 60-passenger bus reimbursement capital funding, for students transported on transit systems. Alternatively, school districts could purchase buses that would be operated by a transit agency.

■ Create alternative student safety procedures for use with pupil transportation. Make sure students understand safe use of multiple modes.

In pursuing a release from regulatory restrictions it is important to pursue the highest standard and not simply the lowest common denominator. Use of substandard vehicles with smaller capacity may allow savings of both initial cost and operating expense. However, while the system may seem to be saving money, it is losing credibility and damaging coordination efforts. Successful coordination seeks accommodation from regulations whose conflicting requirements block reasonable coordination schema. Operators, legislators, and users alike will identify as substandard any efforts that appear to abandon safety, particularly of school children.

Hybrid Vehicles

California utility bus

The California Department of Education has designed and purchased a heavy-duty transit type 42-passenger utility school bus. The bus is fully certified and functional as a school bus and meets ADA requirements with the addition of a second entrance/exit door wheelchair lift combination to the rear on the right side of the bus. In addition to school bus service, this vehicle is intended to provide additional alternative community transportation needs.

This concept vehicle has not been Altoona tested, but essentially the same vehicle is also marketed as a transit bus and has been tested. The design of this vehicle allows for full school bus use, including red flashing loading lights and school bus sign that are covered and deactivated for non-school bus use. While all coordination ideas do not need to wait for availability of such vehicles, this California project demonstrates that coordination is possible while maintaining even the highest safety standards.

Chapter 7   Resources

Organizations and Websites

Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation

www.wsdot.wa.gov/acct

The Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation (ACCT) is a council of state agencies, transportation providers, consumer advocates, and legislators with the mission to:

- Promote the coordination of special needs transportation.

- Provide a forum for discussing issues and initiating change.

- Provide oversight and direction to the state's coordination agenda.

- Report to the legislature and propose legislative remedies.

Washington State Department of Transportation

http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/

The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) is responsible for maintaining 7,000 miles of highways and 3,300 bridges and tunnels, including the longest and widest of the world's first floating bridges. WSDOT also operates the state's most popular tourist attraction—the Washington State Ferries—with 29 boats that carry more than 27 million passengers. WSDOT is also a partner with Amtrak in providing the Amtrak *Cascades* passenger rail service connecting Seattle and other western Washington cities in the Vancouver, B.C./Portland, Oregon, corridor. With local public transportation agencies, it helps provide bus and other transit services through technical assistance and grant opportunities.

Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction

http://www.k12.wa.us/

The pupil transportation office provides essential services in support of pupil transportation in Washington State. In addition to overseeing the allocation of operations funding and the school bus depreciation and replacement systems, the office authorizes all school bus drivers, manages the state bidding process for school buses, provides a training program for school bus driver instructors, and provides additional services for the school districts, school bus drivers, parents, and citizens of the state.

Pupil Transportation Safety Institute

http://www.ptsi.org/

The Pupil Transportation Safety Institute (PTSI) is a not-for-profit school bus safety organization that provides:

- Training resources for drivers, students, and managers.

- Keynote, workshop, driver in-service, and train-the-trainer presentations.

- Consultation services for school districts and contractors.

- Program development and evaluative studies for state agencies.

Community Transportation Association of America

http://www.ctaa.org/

The Community Transportation Association of America offers a variety of technical assistance for communities looking to initiate and/or expand transportation services and programs that link people to jobs, medical care, and other destinations necessary for quality of life.

The Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility

http://www.fta.dot.gov/CCAM/www/index.html

The Coordinating Council on Access and Mobility (CCAM) and the United We Ride Initiative are working to enhance the coordination of human service transportation. The council was created by executive order from the president and is made up of the departments of Transportation, Health and Human Services, Education, Labor, Veterans Affairs, Agriculture, Housing and Urban Development, and the Interior, the Attorney General, and the Commissioner of Social Security.

For Further Reading

Transit Cooperative Research Program (TCRP)

http://www.tcrponline.org/bin/publications.pl

Report 56, *Integrating School Bus and Public Transportation Services in Non-Urban Communities*

TCRP Report 70, *Guidebook for Change and Innovation at Rural and Small Urban Systems*

Volunteer Drivers – A Guide to Best Practices

http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/transit/vdg/default.htm

Local Coordination Planning Guidelines – Improving Transportation for People with Special Transportation Needs through Coordination

http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/acct/library/reports-studies/Local_Planning_Guidelines.pdf

Mason County After School Transportation

Mason County faces a number of geographic and socio-economic challenges, yet is developing a nationally renowned transportation system that serves the local community, particularly its youth. Mason County's story serves as an inspiring snapshot of what coordinated transportation can deliver for rural areas.

Geography is the first transportation challenge for Mason County. Rural areas with hilly terrain and a large body of water surround an urban center. While beautiful, these geographic features divide and isolate many residents. Approximately 13,000 residents live in the urban center while 40,000 more reside in the rural areas.

Mason County is also economically challenged, with an 8 percent unemployment rate. Forty percent of its residents travel out of county everyday for work in Kitsap, Thurston, Pierce, and King Counties. This puts Mason in the top five in Washington State for out-of-county commuters. Many of the students participating in after-school programs live 15 to 25 miles from school with parents who don't return from out-of-county jobs until after dark.

The Mason County Transit Authority was voted into existence in 1992. With five wheelchair accessible vans, the transit authority accommodated 60,000 riders in its first year. Today, Mason Transit has 21 vehicles, with over 300,000 riders. Mason County is also connected to transit systems in Grays Harbor, Jefferson, Kitsap, and Pierce Counties.

Despite all that it offers, Mason Transit still is not always able to supply enough vehicles or routes to meet demand in a county that incorporates 900 square miles—especially for local teens and schoolchildren.

Some after-school programs were available, but none offered transportation for local students to return home safely after dark. School drop out and teen pregnancy rates were among the highest in the state.

Studies show that students engaged in structured activities such as after-school sports are less likely to become pregnant and more likely to stay in school.

A group of concerned parents approached Dave O'Connell of the Mason County Transit Authority to see if any transportation could be provided to help their children access existing after-school programs. Shortly after, state legislation was passed encouraging transportation for social service purposes through the Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation.

"It was as if the legislation was passed just for us," said Dave.

Dave had a loosely organized transportation coalition already in place. They had worked together to develop a volunteer ride services program. Member agencies included Exceptional Foresters, a non-profit agency that works with persons with disabilities, and two American Indian tribes, the Skokomish and the Squaxin, who networked with Mason Transit buses to access jobs and services including native health services in Grays Harbor County.

The next step was to begin discussions with all organizations to find more efficient ways to create transportation access for Mason County's youth. At the time, only a handful of transportation providers were in place and all were working separately. While kids and teens needed transportation, there was no additional money to help. Mason Transit had 21 vehicles and local school districts had 100 buses that ran between 7 a.m. and 3 p.m. each weekday.

Suddenly a plan was born: Why not use school buses to transport kids and teens to local after-school programs and to fill local transit route gaps? The local coalition members heartily endorsed the idea. After numerous discussions and negotiations with the local school districts, Mason County was ready to implement its vision in the form of a pilot program.

The program combined transportation for middle and high school students with transportation for the local community. One of three school buses picked up students following the completion of after-school activities and transported them to designated drop-off points in close proximity to students' homes. Along the way, the buses stopped to pick up and drop off transit riders from the local community. Passengers were allowed to transfer to other points along the way.

The dream had become a reality: persons with disabilities, teens, and high school students rode home from after-school programs with youth from the Boys and Girls Clubs and members of the local community commuting home from work. Mason Transit pays participating school districts $19.86 per hour plus 85 cents a mile to cover labor and bus costs.

The program ceased operation for the summer following its first official run during the 1998-99 school year. The Mason Transportation Coalition received Agency Council on Coordinated Transportation funding to start the program again the following school year. Mason County voters also recently approved a local sales tax referendum to keep the collaborative program in operation.

Since then, the innovative program has received national attention. Today, the local coalition includes over 66 partners that include school districts, WorkSource, Department of Developmental Disabilities, Behavioral Health, and the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. They meet monthly, with action-oriented agendas that keep members focused and engaged. Mason Transit also has a citizens' advisory board; its 17 members serve as ambassadors and engage the local community in its work.

Its philosophies of keeping things simple, implementing action steps at every meeting for achievable results, and collaborating with other organizations and jurisdictions have been key to the Mason Coalition's success. Working together has been so successful that coalition members are now looking at forming as an independent 501(c)(3) organization.

"Very few people thought we could be successful when we started, but now we find that we are inspiring other jurisdictions to think out of the box," said Dave.

Additionally, several other Washington State groups have approached members of the Mason Coalition to find out how they can establish partnerships between school districts and their local transit companies to meet the needs of their communities and youth without expending additional funds.

Dave admits that some challenges remain, including ensuring enough funding to expand and continue the bus-feeder route service. Current policies limit Mason Transit from expanding the program to additional school districts. Most school districts allow the transport of schoolchildren only—and no adults other than teachers or drivers. And there is limited wheelchair access on school buses.

Dave is confident that taking one step at a time is key to the Mason County Transportation Coalition's continued success in meeting the needs of its community.

Ferry County Maintenance Coordination

The Ferry County Coalition realized that vehicle maintenance was a problem for all providers in the county. Lack of local maintenance capability had numerous negative consequences. Vehicles had to take the three-hour one-way trip to Spokane for maintenance work. The cost of the work was higher than if done within Ferry County and it resulted in the vehicle being out of use for a longer period of time. In addition, it required two drivers to drop off a vehicle then return home, or it necessitated an overnight stay. This is a significant problem in a community with limited transportation resources.

A newly appointed school district superintendent decided that a shared maintenance facility would enhance the ability of all local transportation providers to obtain less costly and more convenient maintenance.

As a result of his inspiration, school districts, senior services, the community action program, and others are pooling resources to develop an "at home" maintenance capacity.

The community colleges are working with the coalition to examine the potential for creating a training facility, and have already identified a potential building. A private bus company has committed their expertise to advise the coalition on shop set-up and determining equipment needs.

This project will take nearly two years to completely implement and will provide service to two school districts, two community action programs, the city of Republic, the United States Forest Service, Ferry County, and possibly volunteers and community members.

In addition to providing maintenance services to vehicles operated within the county, the project will also provide a maintenance-training program to create a ready pool of maintenance technicians for the area.

Pierce County Boys and Girls Club

A great need was met for students and families in the Bethel School District when Boys and Girls Club of South Puget Sound and Paratransit Services teamed up to provide transportation for after-school activities. Many students in the district go home to empty houses when they go straight home from school. Parents often work late or work more than one minimum wage job just to make ends meet.

Many of these students lag behind in academic achievement and social skills. Research shows that after-school programs increase school success. After-school programs also provide supervised activities during the hours of 3:00 p.m. and 6:00 p.m., when most juvenile crime occurs.
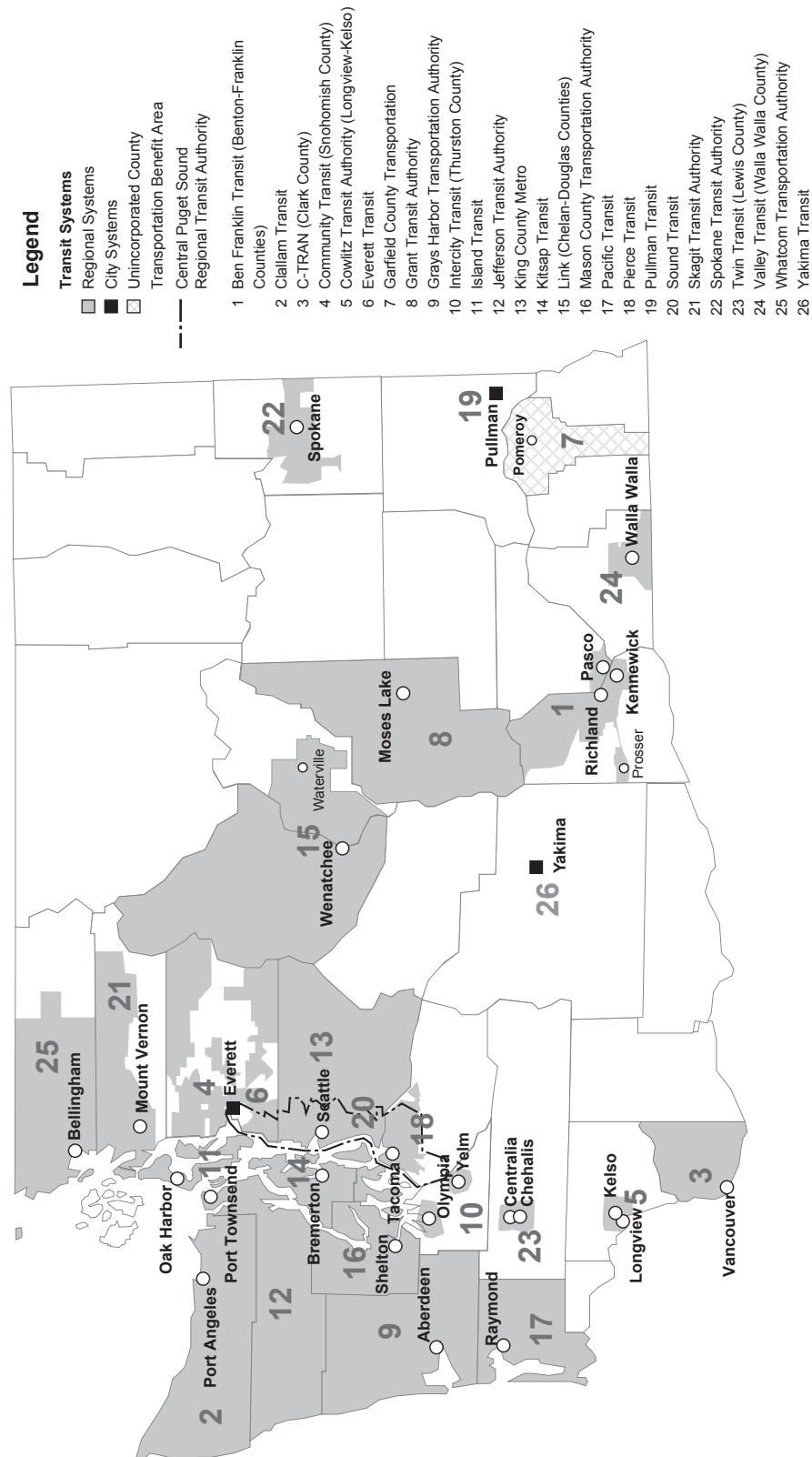
Most of the 220 square miles of the Bethel School District is outside the Pierce Transit Benefit Area. Many families come to the district for the available low-cost housing and do not have a private vehicle. Consequently, transportation is a challenge. This demonstration project allows students to participate in after-school activities. Participating students are more engaged in their learning and less likely to engage in disruptive behavior.

The school district identifies children who will benefit from participation in the program and coordinates with the Boys and Girls Club. The Boys and Girls Club contacts Paratransit Services, a transportation broker, to arrange transportation for each student who participates in the program. Currently, two elementary schools participate.

Program sponsor, Nancy Perry says, "We expect the program will increase. This demonstration project is vital to our district, and fills a gap in transportation services for our students and families. Ryan is an example of the importance of our project. Ryan is a second grader who came to the program with difficulties in anger management. His regular school-teacher reports that he has made huge gains in social skills, and his ability to control his behavior ever since he started attending the program."

Ryan's Mother reports, "The transportation has really helped me out. I work late so Ryan wouldn't be able to participate in the program without it."

Agency Council for Coordinated Transportation

Legend

Transit Systems

- Regional Systems
- City Systems
- Unincorporated County
- Transportation Benefit Area

Central Puget Sound
Regional Transit Authority

1 Ben Franklin Transit (Benton-Franklin Counties)
2 Clallam Transit
3 C-TRAN (Clark County)
4 Community Transit (Snohomish County)
5 Cowlitz Transit Authority (Longview-Kelso)
6 Everett Transit
7 Garfield County Transportation
8 Grant Transit Authority
9 Grays Harbor Transportation Authority
10 Intercity Transit (Thurston County)
11 Island Transit
12 Jefferson Transit Authority
13 King County Metro
14 Kitsap Transit
15 Link (Chelan-Douglas Counties)
16 Mason County Transportation Authority
17 Pacific Transit
18 Pierce Transit
19 Pullman Transit
20 Sound Transit
21 Skagit Transit Authority
22 Spokane Transit Authority
23 Twin Transit (Lewis County)
24 Valley Transit (Walla Walla County)
25 Whatcom Transportation Authority
26 Yakima Transit

Agency Council for Coordinated Transportation

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